

Ephesians 4b Walk Not as the Gentiles

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Overview

The three main sections of practical exhortation are built around three of the five instances of *peripatew* in Eph 4-5:

- walk in unity, 4:1-16
- walk not as the Gentiles, 4:17-5:6
- walk as children of light, 5:7-6:9

The other instances fall within the second and third of these, at 5:2,15; it's not clear to me how they work into the structure, but they don't seem to introduce new sections of the same prominence as these three.

The second section (walk not as the Gentiles)

- begins by contrasting the believers with the Gentiles (4:17-24),
- then gives a series of moral exhortations (4:25-5:6).

These moral exhortations are valuable in themselves. But as I understand them in the context, Paul does not intend them as a closed set. Rather, they are an example of the kind of exhortation that the gifted men should be giving to the people as they “speak the truth in love” (4:15).

4:17-24, “Them—You” Contrast

17-19, *Them*

“Other Gentiles”—further evidence that he is focusing here on a predominantly Gentile population.

This paragraph is closely parallel to Rom 1:19-32, which also discusses the willful ignorance of the Gentiles (19-23) and their resulting abandonment to impurity (24-32).

The nature of Paul's exhortation

“Say and testify”: We think of “testify” as what a witness does in a trial, after a crime has been committed. Hebrew uses the word family more broadly. The noun does refer to the witness after the fact, but the verb refers to what goes before, declaring the law to people and warning them of the consequences if they disobey. This is what Moses (Deut 32:46) and the prophets (2 Kings 17:13,15) did to Israel, and leads to one of the titles for God's law, “testimonies,” which thus would have special focus on the consequences of disobedience. Perhaps the reference is to being a witness to decisions in the divine court.

Paul's language thus recalls the prophets of old, calling God's people to the kind of life God wants them to live. These are not his personal opinions, or merely pragmatic guidelines, but revelations of the will of God, bearing special consequences for disobedience (cf. 5:5,6).

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Application.—It DOES matter how we live. Sometimes we hear that because we “are not under the law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14), we are not governed by the imperatives of God’s word. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consulting Rom. 6:14,15, we see the sense in which we are and are not involved in the law.

- 6:14 shows explicitly that being under grace rather than under law means that sin shall not have dominion over us. That is, law was powerless to deliver us from sin, but grace is able to.
- 6:15 shows that being under grace does NOT mean that we are free to sin. Paul recoils in horror from this suggestion: “God forbid.”

Characterizing the Gentiles

Five characteristics are responsible for their ungodly behavior. Note the chiasmic arrangement.

- The outer two show that their *organs* of perception are paralyzed.
- The next two discuss the *immediate* consequence of that paralysis, while
- The central item emphasizes the *ultimate* consequence.

Structural note: this symmetrical structure is skewed with the syntactic structure, where Hollenbach’s rules show that the fourth and fifth items are subordinate to the third, not parallel to it. However, if we take #3 as summing up the effect of 1 and 2, then there is not reason that its subordinate clauses could not explain it by returning over the same material as the first two.

Paralysis

The Gentiles with whom Paul most interacted, and the Ephesians in particular, were Greeks. They were the great philosophers and scientists of the ancient world, in contrast with the Romans, who were engineers and soldiers. Like modern academicians, the Greeks prided themselves on their rationality, stemming from a highly trained and cultivated mind. But Paul declares that their vaunted minds are “vanity.” The Greek word family reflects the Hebrew *hebel* “wind, breath.” The point of the term is not so much that they were proud and puffed up (though no doubt they were), as that their lofty thoughts were ineffective. They could not reason their way around the really important matters of life, any more than we can today.

Why did they rely so much on their minds? Because their hearts, the more intimate organ of knowledge with which man believes (Rom 10:9,10), are blind. They are incapable to perceiving spiritual reality. Compare 1 Cor 2:14, “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God,” and 2 Cor 4, where the remedy to the blinding that Satan has put on the mind (v.4) is God’s light shining into the heart (v.6).

Application.—In talking with unbelievers, it’s important to realize that in their own strength, they cannot understand a word you’re saying, spiritually. Implications:

- Don’t try to argue them into the kingdom. It won’t work. Just proclaim Christ.
- Don’t become frustrated at their slowness to understand.
- Pray for the Spirit’s work in their hearts.

Ignorance

The next level of the chiasm shows the effect of this paralysis: their understanding is darkened. The ignorance is objectified: not just “they are ignorant,” but “the ignorance that is in them,” like a heavy blanket that blots out the light.

This ignorance does not excuse them. In the parallel in Romans, we learn that they know of God but repress that knowledge (19-22, cf. v.32).

Alienation

In the kinds of subjects that most people study, understanding is optional. If you don't understand calculus, you can always pump gas. But the consequence of ignorance in spiritual matters is much more grave. It leaves them “alienated from the life of God.” As we meditate on this expression, two questions suggest themselves for our special attention.

1. The Scriptures often speak of our being alienated from God: 2:12; Col 1:21; Rom 8:7; etc. So were Adam and Eve alienated, by being cast out of the garden. Why then does Paul go further to say, not “alienated from God,” but “alienated from the life of God”? Alienation was in itself death (Gen 2:17 “in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” partially fulfilled in the expulsion). Why does Paul here explicitly say, “alienated from the life of God”?
2. The cause of the alienation is unusual. Elsewhere it is sin: Gen 2:17 (eating contrary to the commandment), Col 1:21 (“by wicked works”), Isa 59:2 (“your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you”). Here Paul emphasizes that it is ignorance, resulting from blindness.

The answer to both of these questions may lie in the expression, “life of God.” The meaning of the Greek genitive case, usually represented by “of” in English, can vary widely. One of its uses is to indicate source. Examples:

- Rom 15:4, “patience and comfort of the Scriptures,” that is, patience and comfort that come from the Scriptures
- Acts 1:4, “wait for the promise of the Father,” that is, the promised Spirit coming from the Father
- 2 Cor 4:7, “the excellency of the power may be of God,” that is, from God.

If we adopt this sense here, “life of God” is life from God, specifically the new life that God offers men through his Son. Like all men, the Gentiles are alienated from God by their wicked works, and thus “dead in trespasses and sins” (2:1). The point of this verse is not to provide an alternative diagnosis for that death, but to explain what keeps them from the only cure. This is consistent with the imagery of blindness in 2 Cor 4, where it explains why unbelievers do not come to God to receive his salvation.

The underlying logic is: you are different than the other Gentiles. They, persisting in their natural blindness, cannot receive the life that God gives. By God's grace, you have received that life. So it should make a difference in you, and you must not walk as they do.

Characterizing their Behavior

After summarizing their condition from the last paragraph, he describes their surrender and their action.

Summary of their Condition

“Being past feeling” is a summary of their condition, described in the last paragraph. The word has the sense of “recklessness.” They are so blind to the law and will of God that they behave with utter abandon; they have recklessly “given themselves over” to ungodly behavior.

Their Surrender

“Gave themselves up” (παραδίδωμι): Compare this section with Rom. 1:18ff, where because men “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” “God gave them up” (same word). We have here the same duality that appears in Exodus with regard to Pharaoh, the hardening of whose heart is attributed both to himself (8:15,32) and to the Lord (9:12).

Application.—People sometimes accuse God of complicity in their sin: “If he really didn’t want me to do it, why doesn’t he stop me?” Without inquiring into the divine motives, the fact is clear from these examples, and the principle is laid down in Ps 81:8-12 in reference to, “I gave them up [God’s part] unto their own hearts’ lust [their part].” How dreadful a thing this is, when God withdraws his restraining hand and abandons men to their own sinful desires. This is why we must not have any patience with sin in our own lives, but diligently flee from it:

- 1 Cor 6:18, “flee fornication”
- 1 Cor 10:14, “flee from idolatry”
- 1 Tim 6:11, “flee these things,” viz., “envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings” (vv.4-5) and covetousness (vv.6-10)
- 2 Tim 2:22, “flee youthful lusts”
- Rom 13:14, “make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof”

Sin is not something with which we can play around, daydreaming about it, participating in it vicariously through literature, drama, or film, letting it titillate us while we assure ourselves that we have not “crossed the line.” In dating behavior in particular, there is a great temptation to indulge in physical arousal while trying to avoid fornication. Our Lord’s warning about the adultery of the lustful look (Matt 5:28) should squelch that idea. “The thought of foolishness is sin,” Prov 24:9. The knowledge that God gives people what they want should motivate us to regulate our wants. Thus we are called to “fear the Lord, and depart from evil,” Prov. 3:7, cf. 16:6; Job 28:8.

There is a blessed counterpart to this downward spiral that if we toy with sin, God will give us over to it. It is expressed most succinctly in Ps 37:4, “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” If we occupy ourselves with the Lord, meditating in his word, fellowshiping with his people, making him the priority in our lives, he will place within our hearts godly desires, those that we can pursue with a clean conscience. It is a false parody of the spiritual life that sees us as always trying to live one way while desiring to live another. God

desires us to be single-minded in pursuit of holiness, and promises that if we delight ourselves in him, he will fill us with desires that he can abundantly satisfy.

Details of their Action

Now he mentions some of the aspects of conduct to which they have abandoned themselves. Rom. 1:26-32 gives a much fuller list, with which these aspects are entirely consistent.

Lasciviousness.—Wanton lewdness. Lightfoot: “A man may be ακαθαρτος [unclean] and hide his sin; he does not become ασεληγης [lascivious] until he shocks public decency.”

Work All Uncleaness.—Deliberate activity in pursuit of impurity.

Greediness.—Usually translated “covetousness,” as it is here in 5:3. Not restricted to desire for possessions; the underlying idea is disregard for the rights of others, selfishness.

Both here and in Rom 1, sexual impurity is the leading characteristic of those whom God has given over. Unbelievers parody this and accuse Christians of rejecting the pleasures of physical intimacy. Nothing could be further from the truth: Eccl. 9:9, “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of [thy] life.” But God has ordained that that intimacy be enjoyed *within* marriage, and any pursuit of it outside of the marriage bond is sin.

20-24, You

“Christ, only Christ”

He recalls the original teaching by which they were introduced into the Christian faith, speaking first of the process and focus, then of the content.

20-21, Process

They have “learned Christ,” as one might learn geometry or astronomy. He is the focus of their education as believers. Such an education makes it impossible that they should countenance thoughts or actions like those of the other Gentiles. He amplifies “learn Christ” with three subordinate clauses describing in more detail how Christ is related to their education: as Subject, Setting, and Source.

Subject.—“You have heard Christ.” The Greek case (accusative rather than genitive) indicates that the reference is not to hearing Christ, the person, speaking, but to hearing the subject matter concerning him, almost as though there were quote marks around the name: You have heard “Christ.” Your ears were filled with Christ. This is a critical exhortation to us concerning our focus in the assembly. In teaching, we should imitate the example of our Lord on the road to Emmaus “expound[ing] unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:27), or Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch “preach[ing] unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35). In learning, we should be like the Greeks at Jerusalem, who said to Philip, “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:21).

Setting.—“You have been taught in him.” Probably εν αυτω means “in him” here, rather than “about him.” “Being in him, you were taught.” The impact of this subject matter is entirely different on a believer (one “in him”) than on an unbeliever. As we reviewed in vv.17-19, the unbeliever is constitutionally incapable of receiving instruction concerning Jesus Christ. Only in intimate union with the Lord Jesus can we truly “learn Christ.”

Source.—The clause “as the truth is in Jesus” probably amplifies all three of the previous clauses. “As” may have the sense of “since” here. “I can insist on the centrality of Christ in your learning, your hearing, your teaching, because that’s where truth resides.” Note the shift from “Christ” to “Jesus,” the human name. Paul rarely uses this name, but when he does, the emphasis is on our Lord’s earthly life and teaching.

Application.—The early church focused its attention on the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The central meeting of the church, the breaking of bread, was “in remembrance of” him. More generally, everything they did was focused on him. Let this be our emphasis as well.

22-24, *Content*

The content of the teaching is expressed in three clauses. These are to be taken as exhortations: “you were taught to put off, to be renewed, to put on.” The “putting off” and “putting on” are depicted as deliberate actions that we are called upon to make. The “renewing” is an ongoing process to which we submit ourselves by the putting off and putting on. Consider the actions first, then the process.

22, “Put off the old man”

“Put off”.—The verb properly refers to garments (Acts 7:58). Paul commonly uses this metaphor to refer to our manner of life (e.g., Rom 13:12; Col 3:8). Consider a student going to interview for a job. During his years in school, our student may wear blue jeans and a tee shirt to class, but when he shows up on at his prospective employer, to demonstrate that he is no longer a student but now a productive, business-like professional, he wears a suit and tie. New believers should be taught, “You are no longer what you were. Your ethical garments should match your new position.”

“The old man”.—Contrasted with the “new man” in Col 3:9,10.

- What does it mean? Other terms:
 - Commonly referred to as “old nature,” but this is not a biblical term.
 - Contrasted with the “new man” in v.24; Col 3:9,10; cf. Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14. The origin of this is Rom 5:12-21, the realization that there are ultimately only two men in the world, Adam and Christ, and we are either in one or in the other. (But note that this “new man” is “created.” It is not just Christ, but the application of Christ to be believer. Cf. also 2:15; it involves the unification of Jew and Gentile into one “new man,” with whom the believer is united.
 - “The body of sin,” Col 2:11; Rom 6:6; cf. “members” in Col 3:5 and “flesh” Rom 13:14. Our current body, inherited from Adam, is fallen and liable to sin. Thus the importance of the transformation promised in Phil 3:21, when we shall “be fashioned like unto his glorious body.”
- When does this happen? In Col 3:9,10; Rom 6:6; Gal 3:27 the change is positional, in the past. But there is a practical aspect as well, seen in Rom 13:14. Note also that sinful deeds are gone positionally in Col 3:9, but must be dealt with in practice in 3:5,8.

“Concerning the former conversation”.—Modifies “put off.” In former days you wore the garments of the old man gladly and naturally, enjoying their fit. Now they are at odds with our

real self, and we should be eager to get rid of them. NB: our physical body is not who we really are; it is simply our clothing. Before salvation and after the rapture our true selves and our clothing match. In between, they are out of harmony, like a poorly fitting suit, and we are always occupied with pinning them up or trimming them aside to keep from tripping. Cf. St. Francis of Assisi, who referred to his body as “brother ass,” a necessary accessory to life, but oh so stubborn.

“Which is corrupt acc. to the deceitful lusts”.—Two things here require attention.

1. “Deceitful lusts” is better, “the lusts of deceit.” The reference is back to v.19, which represented the lusts not as deceiving the gentiles, but as being the result of their blind, deceived condition. How about us as believers? Can we be deceived? In this life, our knowledge is only partial (1 Cor 13:9). Paul frequently warns his readers, “be not deceived” (1 Cor 6:9; 15:33; Gal 6:7) and “let no man deceive himself” (1 Cor 3:18) or “deceive you” (Eph 5:6; 2 Thes 2:3; cf. 1 John 3:7). It appears this is a danger to which we are subject, and this is confirmed by our next observation:
2. Note the present tense of the verb, which properly indicates ongoing activity: “which is being corrupted.” Paul suggests that even in the believer, these lusts continue to exert their corrupting influence. This may explain why, having “put off” the old man in salvation, we still need to be exhorted to “put” him “off.” The corrupting process continues, and today there is corruption that I need to shed that was not there yesterday. Recall the process of polishing the brass on a ship: you “put off” the corrosion and get it all shiny. After a few days it is dull again because of the corrosive effect of the salt air, so you need to polish it again. But in this case, the corrosion comes from within.

24, “Put on”

Adam was created “in the image of God,” Gen. 1:27, LXX “after the image of God.” Paul picks up this language here in asserting that the “new man” that we put on has also been created “after God,” that is, according to his image. We are called upon to be “god-ly,” and to clothe ourselves in his likeness.

The particular details of this likeness that we are to manifest are

- “righteousness,” conformity with God’s standard, thus becoming like him;
- “holiness,” separation from all that is against him.

These are both said to be “of truth” (“righteousness and holiness of truth”). The phrase is a direct contrast with the end of v.22, “lusts of deception.” There, Paul teaches that ungodly conduct (“lusts”) results from the deception that Satan has brought upon unbelievers, blinding them to the truth. Here, Paul affirms that because of the truth that we have learned, we have access to righteousness and holiness.

23, “Be renewed”

Here we are instructed how this “putting off” and “putting on” are to take place. Note two things:

Be renewed.—The verb is passive. Unlike the putting off and putting on, which we do, this is done by someone else to us. Our place is to let it happen; to submit ourselves to this renewal.

In the spirit of your mind.—Raises the whole question of man's spirit and its relation to the HS. We are greatly helped in this case by the close parallel in Col 3:9,10, which speaks of the putting off, putting on, and renewal. The renewal there is said to be "in knowledge, after [acc. to] the image of him that created him."

- "in knowledge" corresponds to "your mind." The mind is the starting point of this renewal. We need to let God change the way we think, and we do that by focusing our attention on him, in prayer and through his word. Our Lord taught that it is "from within, out of the heart of men," that evil conduct springs (Mark 7:17), and we must be open to change within. Compare:
 - 2 Cor 3:18: "we ... beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image."
 - Rom 12:2, "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."
- "acc. to the image" corresponds to "the spirit." There is a human spirit distinct from the divine spirit (Rom 8:16). To my knowledge, the NT nowhere attributes this human spirit to unbelievers, and in fact Jude 19 may be a reference to this human spirit, which is lacking in the natural or "soulish" man. It comes into being when we are "born of ... the Spirit" (John 3), and when it is mature, we are called "spiritual." The present verse is showing us the dynamics by which we move from babes in Christ to spirituality. When the process is complete, we shall be like the Lord Jesus, the perfect union of body and spirit.

Application: This renewal is not the result of our fleshly effort; we open ourselves to it, and it happens. But how do we open ourselves to it? By focusing our minds on the things of God, through the regular reading of Scripture, memorization, prayer, and exhortation with the people of God.

Verb Tenses

"Put off" and "put on" are aorists, while "be renewed" is present. Probably this simply reflects the semantics of the verbs. Donning or doffing an article of clothing is a moment's task. Even if it must be repeated, it is iterative, not continuous. But renewal is continuous.

4:25-27, General Injunction to Sound Teaching

Now we begin a section of specific exhortations that will guide them in walking not as other Gentiles walk. The first three verses introduce these exhortations by reminding them of two things:

1. the responsibilities they bear as members of the body of Christ (25);
2. the example of David in Ps 4 (26-27).

v.25, My Responsibility in the Body

4:25 is really a summary of 4:1-16. There we learned that our unity is to be manifested through the harmonious exercise of diverse gifts. Though four categories of gifted men may be the most prominent (4:11), their function is to articulate the saints with one another so that all believers

may participate in the work of edifying the body. They do this by “speaking the truth in love” to one another (4:15), a responsibility that reflects their position as organs and members of the body of Christ (4:16).

The argument is just the same here. Because “we are members one of another,” we are to “speak every man truth with his neighbor.”

When we recognize the link with 4:15-16, we see that v.25 is far more than an exhortation not to deceive. We “speak the truth” with one another when our speech reflects our responsibility toward them as members of the body of Christ. That responsibility requires us to “reprove, rebuke, exhort” (2 Tim 4:2) one another. It is our responsibility to speak to our brother or sister both when they sin against us (Matt 18:15) and when we realize that they think we have sinned against them (Matt 5:23). It may be easier to ignore one another’s weaknesses, but such conduct would be to “lie ... one to another” (Col 3:9).

vv.26-27, David’s Example

This responsibility is not a new revelation in the New Testament. Paul next quotes from the LXX of Ps 4:4. “Be angry and sin not” is the LXX of “Stand in awe, and sin not.” To understand the significance of this quotation, we need to recognize the context of Ps. 4.

- It is paired with Ps 3. That was a morning psalm, giving thanks on awaking for the Lord’s care through the night (3:5), while this is an evening psalm, entrusting oneself to the Lord on retiring (4:8). Both contain the unusual expression, “there be many that say...” (3:2; 4:6).
- Ps 3 is explicitly dated to David’s flight from Absalom and the rebels, and it makes sense to put Ps 4 here also.
- Then 4:2-5 is addressed to Absalom and his party. David’s attitude avoids two ungodly extremes.
 - He does not ignore them, speaking only to God. Instead, he addresses them directly.
 - His address is not one of bitterness and wrath, but of sober exhortation. He desires that they may be blessed, and tells them what they need to do to receive that blessing.

Paul presents Ps 4 as an example of how one believer should exhort others. When we see the sins of others, it is tempting to say, “That’s their problem,” and leave it to them, or perhaps only pray for them. When we do speak, it is tempting to lash out and tear down. What is needed is the gentle, concerned rebuke that David exemplifies.

Be angry and sin not.—This is the actual quotation from the Psalm. The Hebrew is “tremble,” which may reflect either an attitude of awe (AV) or of anger (LXX). David knows that Absalom is angry with him. Very well, be angry with David. In itself, that is not sin. But David is the Lord’s chosen one (v.3). Do not let your anger overflow into sin against the Lord’s anointed.

Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.—This is a paraphrase of Ps 4:4b, “commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.” 4:6 shows that this is an evening psalm. As David prepares to retire for the night, he desires that his adversaries would put away their malice as

well. This insight is extremely valuable. The mind sorts itself out during sleep, developing a synthesis of various thoughts (cf. the experience of having a problem solve itself). If we retire with godly attitudes, they will be integrated into the overall synthesis. If we retire with sinful ones, the outcome will be rebellious and lead us into wickedness.

Neither give place to the devil.—More remote from the Psalm, but perhaps an explicit contrast with 4:5, “offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the Lord.” If we do let our minds drift off to sleep in an ungodly state, we are opening the door to Satan to program them to suit his purposes.

- David recognized that his adversaries could not be neutral toward the Lord. More than their friendship, he desires their godliness.
- Paul presents the other side of the coin. To “give place” is to stand aside and allow someone else to take over. Thus this injunction, combined with Ps 4:5, is the same as James 4:7, “Submit yourselves therefore to God [Ps 4:5]. Resist the devil [Eph 4:27], and he will flee from you.” See also 1 Pet 5:8,9, “your adversary the devil . . . resist steadfast in the faith.” Note that we are to “flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22), which are intrinsic to us, but stand fast against the external threat posed by Satan. The lusts are an aspect of the old man, which we are to put off; Satan is our designated adversary with whom it is our mission to do battle.

4:28-5:5, Specific Injunctions

Against this background, the string of injunctions that follow are to be taken more as examples than as a comprehensive list. Still, there is system to them.

- They are arranged in a chiasm about 4:31-5:2, an expanded warning against wrath, corresponding to the example from the Psalm that stimulated Paul’s thought.
- Each prohibition is paired with a positive command, suggesting a general guideline for godly living. It is not a matter of *abstention* from improper actions, but rather of *replacing* the old modes of interaction with the new.

4:28, Theft

Negative Prohibition.—Stop stealing. Not just “don’t steal”; Paul recognizes that the grace of God may save someone whose previous life has been far from godly (“such were some of you,” 1 Cor 6:11; cf. our Lord’s association with publicans). He does not despise them for their past, but requires that they now conform to the law of God (Exod 20:15) and abandon their former customs.

Positive Command.—A summary and an expansion:

- Summary “labor.” This aspect of the curse (Gen 3:17-19) still rests on us. We must work for our keep.
- Expansion: “working good with his hands.” For “work good” *ergazomai to agaqon*, see Rom 2:10; Gal 6:10. The acceptable labor for the believer is not just something that is neutral, but something that positively helps those around us, “good works for necessary

uses,” Tit 3:14. We are to be discerning in the causes we advance by our labor. It’s not “just a job.”

Motive.—The world motivates people to diligence with the motive of self-gratification: “work hard so that you can retire at 40, build a big house, have a boat, . . .” Providing for our own needs is not wrong (1 Thes 4:12 “that ye may have lack of nothing”; 2 Thes 3:8 “that we might not be chargeable to any of you”), but here the motive that God gives us for diligence is not selfish consumption, but being able to care for the needs of others.

4:29-30, Impurity

Again, we have a contrast (paired negative and positive command), and a motive.

Negative prohibition.—A warning against “corrupt speech.”

- Literally, the word focuses on a specific kind of useless speech, that which is impure or corrupt. Calvin: “all those expressions which are wont to be employed for the purpose of inflaming lust.” Paul probably has this in mind, for in the parallel in Col 4:6 urges that our speech be “seasoned with salt,” which would preserve it from corruption. This also corresponds in the chiasm with 5:3-5. “Dirty talk” is certainly inappropriate for the believer, and it is well that the Spirit of God has included this explicit warning against it.
- The word has acquired a broader idiomatic meaning, “useless,” unnecessary, which is the meaning in its other NT occurrences, and most notably in the Lord’s teachings in Matt 7:15-23; 12:31-37, comparing speech to the fruit of a tree, which may be either “good” or “corrupt” σαπρός. Paul is no doubt drawing from these. A “corrupt,” rotten tree would be dead, and so can hardly bear fruit, but there are fruit-bearing trees that are useless. Compare the summary in Matt 12:36, which Paul no doubt has in mind here: “idle word.” At first glance, this meaning appears to be tamer than “corrupt.” But it is actually much stronger, because it is more inclusive. Filthy talk is certainly “useless” for any godly purpose, but other forms of chit-chat are also useless, and are included in the prohibition. Cf. the warnings we have been considering in James, “slow to speak.” If we are always running off at the mouth, others will tend to discount what we say. Verbal inflation: the more money (talk) there is around, the less people value it.

Positive command.—As in Matthew, the contrast is between “useless” and “good” (αγαθος, like the tree in 7:17-18; the speech is καλος). “Good” is here explained in two ways:

- “To the use of edifying,” lit. “to building up of the need.” A Christian’s speech should be in response to a specific need, serving a specific purpose.
- More specifically: it is “to give grace to the hearers.” The RCC talks about the sacraments as “means of grace.” Here is a true biblical “means of grace”: the speech of one believer to another. As we “speak the truth in love,” we are the channels of God’s unmerited favor to one another.

Clearly, we can fail this commandment in two ways. One is by occupying our lips in ungodly, useless speech. The other is by failing to speak when there is a need. There are at least two categories of such need:

- Let us be on the lookout for those who are discouraged, or wandering astray, and seek God’s strength to speak a word in due season.

- Our lips are also given to us that we may worship God with them.

Prov 15:23: “A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word *spoken in due season*, how good *is it!*”

Motive.—He motivates appropriate speech by reminding us of the indwelling HS. We cannot lose this Spirit, for it seals us until the Lord’s return (cf. also 1:13-14). But if we live inconsistently with his purposes, we can grieve him. Speech is central to God’s nature and his image in us. God’s first recorded actions are the words of creation in Gen 1. 5:18-20 shows that the Spirit’s control in our lives is evident first of all in our speech, in exhortation and worship. We have been entrusted with this great tool; let us be careful not to abuse it in aimless banter, or filthy talk.

4:31-5:2, Wrath

The importance of this paragraph is seen in three ways:

- It is the central item in the structure.
- It picks up the theme in the example from David, cited in v.26.
- It is the longest paragraph of any in this section.

It has two each of positive exhortations and motives, not just one as in the earlier paragraphs.

31, Negative Prohibition.—“Let <six things> be put away from you.” The six things: can these be seen as an ascending sequence?

- bitterness πικρία <4088>.—an embittered and resentful spirit. Examples:
 - Naomi on her return to Bethlehem as a widow (Ruth 1:20, πικρία)
 - Hannah childless at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:10; κατωδυνος)
 - Peter after denying the Lord (Matt 26:75).

In all cases this is based on personal tragedy, sometimes due to the individual’s own sin (Peter), sometimes not (Hannah).

Heb 12:15 contains two vital pieces of instruction about bitterness, concerning its source and its destination.

1. It identifies the *source* of bitterness: the previous context shows that bitterness flourishes when we do not recognize misfortune as the Lord’s loving hand of chastening on us (Heb 12:1-11).
 2. It describes bitterness as a *root* that can lead to worse problems, thus defiling many. Our verse in Eph describes the plant that can grow from this root.
- wrath θυμος <2372>.—a rush of angry passion, arising quickly but then subsiding. Characteristic of someone who has a “short fuse,” as a result of the bitterness underneath. Paul never uses this word for the wrath of God (though the Revelation has several examples of both this and the next; cf. 16:19; 19:15 for the two together). Examples:
 - Luke 4:28, the outburst of the people in the synagogue of Nazareth against the Lord;

- Acts 19:28, the response of the silversmiths to Demetrius' accusation of Paul.
- Anger *οργη* <3709>.—settled indignation. This is Paul's word for the wrath of God—not out of control, but deliberate and purposeful. This kind of attitude can arise if we repeatedly indulge the previous one. It is the attitude of Absalom's party that is condemned in Ps 4:4 and quoted in v.26. Compare the settled antagonism of the Jewish leaders toward the end of our Lord's ministry (though the word family does not appear to be used of them in this connection).
- Clamour *κραυγη* <2906>.—"Outcry," a sudden loss of control. Now we have progressed from inner feelings to outer expression. The sequence is important if we would learn to obey the injunctions of James against evil speaking. We say that we cannot control such outbursts, and indeed we cannot if we focus on them. But Paul here traces them back to unresolved bitterness, which results from not trusting the Lord with every detail of our circumstances. If we focus on dealing with that, and receiving his chastisement with trust in his love and benignity toward us, then the subsequent developments of wrath, anger, and evil speaking will be done away.
- evil speaking *βλασφημια* <988>.—More deliberate than "clamour"; speech that slanders or tears down another. This usually involves planning and deliberation.
- Malice *κακια* <2549>.—Ill-will. In Titus 3:3, grouped with envy and hate. Here, it seems to be the ultimate fruit of this evil chain, a deep-seated antagonism against our fellow man stemming from our bitterness over how God has treated us.

Application: Let us root out this plague at its beginnings, and "look diligently ... lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you" (Heb 12:15). The key is to recognize past suffering as God's loving training for us, and to learn to thank him for it.

Now consider the verb, "be put away." The passive leaves the agent unspecified. It would be hasty to conclude that we are *not* the agent; in the parallel in Col. 3:8, we are told to put the same things away. But the emphasis here is different. However it goes, whether you put it away or God takes away the burden, are you willing for it to be gone? Or do you cling to your bitterness, and the resulting sins, as something precious? Let it be put away. Recognize the damage that it is doing to you; see it for what it is, as Satan's venom poisoning your entire life; and forsake it. Replace it with the assurance that whatever happens to you is under God's control.

32a, First Positive Command.—Be kind, be tenderhearted, forgive. These are parallel by way of contrast to the first three in v.31, and in a similar way build on one another.

- Kind *χρηστος* <5543>.—Gentle, gracious. Connected with God's forgiveness of sin in Ps 25:7,8. Josephus (*Antiquities* 1.264) associates this quality with Isaac in his treatment of Abimelech king of Gerar, even in the face of previous affronts (Gen 26:17-30). It is thus something of an opposite to "bitterness," not being upset by past reversals.
- Tenderhearted *ευσπλαγχνος* <2155>.—This is the opposite of "wrath." The believer is not to have a short fuse, but rather to be marked by a sensitivity and compassion toward the sufferings of others. The Greek word literally means "well-bowelled," responding sympathetically in the innermost feelings. Thus the emphasis here is on the initial emotional response—not a burst of wrath, but rather responding in pity.

- Forgive *χαρίζομαι* <5843>.—Deliberate kindness toward others, in contrast with the deliberate malicious intent of “anger.”

32b, First Motive.—Compare the Lord’s parable in Matt 18:21ff. Having received such great forgiveness from God, how can we possibly deny it to one another? Compare also the motive in Rom 15:7. Our treatment of one another is to be guided by how God “in Christ” (not “for Christ’s sake”) has treated us.

5:1,2a, Second Positive Command.—“Be followers [lit. imitators] of God, and walk in love.” Our daily conduct is to be marked by love one toward another, imitating the conduct that God exemplified in the Lord Jesus. This is the opposite of “malice” in 4:31. Instead of seeking evil for others, we are to seek their benefit.

5:2b, Second Motive.—Our attention is drawn to the Godward aspect of Christ’s loving treatment of us. His sacrifice toward us constitutes a sweet savour to the Father. In walking in love toward one another, we not only benefit one another, but also bring joy to the Father.

5:3-5 Uncleaness and Covetousness

Here the first two topics are repeated, but joined together and mentioned twice (5:3, 5).

Negative Prohibition.—Six items are excluded. All deal either with uncleaness or covetousness.

- Fornication *πορνεία* <4202>.—Any physical relations outside of marriage.
- Uncleaness *ακαθαρσία* <167>.—Most general term for physical impurity; emphasizes the *effect* of the conduct in defiling the body, rather than the specific *nature* of the conduct. Cf. Rom. 1:24, “to dishonour their own bodies.” Under the old covenant, this noun and the associated adjective *ακαθαρός* “unclean” dominate in Leviticus, where they describe a wide range of daily experiences, including food, leprosy, and even proper physical relations between a man and wife (Lev 15:16-18). In the NT, the defilement associated with intimacy is removed within marriage, Heb. 13:4, but continues outside of marriage.
- Covetousness *πλεονεξία* <4124>.—A compelling desire to possess. Luke 12:15, thinking that our lives are defined by what we possess. This item takes us back to the thief of v.28. In the motive (v.5), we are further told that this attitude is idolatry, since it focuses our love and devotion on things rather than on God.
- Filthiness *αισχροτης* <151>.—Shamefulness; in Colossians 3:8 the emphasis is on shameful speech. He forbids impure speech as well as impure conduct. Our Savior taught that the impure thought is condemned with the deed (Matt 5:28), so speech that generates such thought must be rejected as well.
- foolish talking *μωρολογία* <3473>.—Cf. Matt 12:34-37. Idle words; words carrying “folly.” Paul’s use of the word “fool” is informed by the OT usage, notably Proverbs, in which the term has ethical connotations. The fool is wicked, slothful, atheistic, neglectful of Scripture. Don’t talk like a fool. Again, the wicked thought and word is condemned along with the deed. Stay as far from the cliff as you can.
- Jestng *ευτραπεία* <2160>.—Online Bible: “a subtle form of evil-speaking, sinful conversation without the coarseness which frequently accompanies it, but not without its

malignity.” Aristotle: “well-bred insolence,” wittiness, the ability to turn a phrase cleverly, including sarcasm and social insults. Coveted as a social skill among the Greeks, and in much modern society. But as a hallmark of pride that tears down others even though in jest, it is to have no place among believers. Cf. Prov. 26:18,19; Eccl. 10:1.

Note the command here: not “let them be put away” in case they should occur, but “let it not be once named among you.” It is even more vital that these kinds of flaws should have no place in our lives. Our personal purity is of the very highest importance.

Positive Command.—“Giving of thanks.” He has moved from physical impurity to impure speech (cf. 4:29), and the appropriate counterbalance to this is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving in the NT can be toward people (once, Rom 16:4). More commonly, even when someone has done us a favor, the order is to thank God for them (Phil 1:3). Thanksgiving, especially in times of trouble, is the most salutary exercise in which we can engage; it trains us to look to God for his blessings and care.

Motives.—Three, distributed through the paragraph. Such conduct is inconsistent with our relation to the Lord, to ourselves, and to our new homeland.

- “as becometh saints,” that is, those who are separate from the world. We are called upon to be distinct from unbelievers. This motive is so powerful that it may even justify being different in amoral ways (cf. Israel’s clothing, diet, etc.). How much more should we be distinct in moral issues?
- “which are not convenient” or “fitting”: this conduct is inconsistent with the new man, which we have put on.
- Exclusion from the kingdom: The same three categories as in 5:3, with the additional note that a covetous person is an idolater, because he has given to something else the devotion and love that God alone deserves. Such individuals can expect no share in the Lord’s kingdom.

5:6, General Injunction to Sound Teaching

Link back to 4:25. The deception in question is with respect to such ethical injunctions. Do not permit social correctness to lead you astray in thinking that such behavior can be overlooked. Rather, you who are spiritual (Gal 6:1), speak truth one to another. God is just and holy, and his wrath will fall on those who live as the world does. Let us not abandon one another to such a fate.

Notes

“Testify” v.17

Several possible meanings in the Bible.

Bear witness in a criminal case (ענה 06030).—In this case, the testimony is indicative. The Hebrew word in such cases is ענה, “to answer,” perhaps responding to the protestations of innocence from the accused. E.g., Num 35:30; Deut 19:16,18; 2 Sam 1:16. עור does not appear to be used in this connection. Yet surprisingly, its nominal cognate עור 05707 DOES refer to the one who carries out this role!

Warn of the consequences of your deeds (05749 עוֹד).—Deut 8:19; Neh 13:21. Exod 21:29 probably falls here, suggesting that the case is of a purchaser of an ox who is told by the previous owner that the ox is liable to gore, and therefore warned to keep it locked up.

Exhort to behave in a certain way (05749 עוֹד).—Possibly identical with the previous, since there is an implied (or sometimes explicit) consequence for disobedience. This is the sense in v.17, also 2 Kings 17:13. In the OT, this is the verbal form of the noun “testimonies,” עֲדוּת, used to describe an aspect of the law. Deut 32:46. This is what the prophets do: 2 Chr 24:19; Neh 9:26.

“Under the Law”

Christians not here

Romans 6:14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

Romans 6:15 What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.

Galatians 5:18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

General

Romans 3:19 ¶ Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under en the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

1 Corinthians 9:20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law;

1 Corinthians 9:21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law ennemos to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

Galatians 3:23 But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

Galatians 4:5 To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Galatians 4:21 ¶ Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?

“Old Man” etc.

Terms for our Former Condition

The Old Nature.—Not a biblical term, and perhaps inappropriate in this context. It is true that Gentiles were “by nature” children of wrath (Eph 2:3) and that believers are now “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). However, Paul distinguishes the “nature” of even unsaved Jews

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from that of the Gentiles (Gal 2:15), suggesting that “nature” φυσικς is not used in the same sense as other terms for the carnal characterization of the unbeliever that persists after salvation.

The Old Man.—Eph 4:22; Col 3:9; Rom 6:6

The Flesh.—Rom 7:14-18, that which characterizes the “carnal” (“fleshly”) Christian, the babe in Christ, 1 Cor 3:1. Rom 13:14

The body of the sins of the flesh.—Col 2:11; Rom 6:6

Specific deeds.—Col 3:8

Terms for our New Condition

It may help to consider what we are said to “put on.”

The New Man.—Col 3:10

The Lord Jesus Christ.—Rom 13:14, by which we frustrate the flesh. Gal 3:27

Summary re. Chronology

Darby etc. try to distinguish some of these as having been dealt with in the past, others now, but the reference to specific sins in both categories in Col. 3:8,9 suggests that there are positional and practical aspects to all of them.

	Positionally Done	Practically Ongoing
What we Put Off, Crucify		
Old Man	Rom 6:6; Col 3:9	Eph 4:22
Body of Sin		Rom 6:6; Col 2:11
Specific Sins	Col 3:9	Col 3:5,8
Flesh	Gal 5:24	Rom 13:14
What we Put On, Make Alive		
Christ	Gal 3:27	Rom 13:14
New Man	Col 3:10	
Righteous Deeds		Col 3:12

The Human Spirit

Key Verses

Jude 19, not having spirit (or, the Spirit, but anarthrous in Gk)

Rom 8:16, distinct from human spirit

Use with Possessives

“His Spirit”: Jesus (Mark 2:8; 8:12), Paul (Acts 17:16), Titus (2 Cor 7:13)

“Your spirit”: 1 Cor 6:20 (with “body”), Gal 6:18; Phil 1:25; 1 Thes 5:23.

“My spirit”: Mary (Luke 1:47); Jesus (Luke 23:46), Stephen (Acts 7:59), Paul (Rom 1:9; 1 Cor 5:4; 14:14; 16:18; 2 Cor 2:13)

“Our spirit”: Rom 8:16 (note the explicit distinction between God’s Spirit and ours).

“Thy spirit”: 2 Tim 4:22

Functions:

- having rest, a spiritual “compass”: 2 Cor 2:13; Acts 17:16
- focus of benediction: Gal 6:18; Phil 1:25; 1 Thes 5:23; 2 Tim 4:22

Analysis, 4:17-5:6

<<#>> keys to the ten commandments

4:17-24, “Them—You” Contrast

17-19, Them

17 Tou^to ou)^n le/gw kai\ martu/romai e)n kuri/w|,

mhke/ti u(ma^s peripatei^

kaqw\s kai\ ta\ e)/qnh peripatei^

e)n mataio/thti tou^ noo\s au)tw^ⁿ,

18 e)skotwme/noi th^| dianoi/a|,

o)/ntes a)phllotriwme/noi th^s zwh^s tou^ qeou^, *on grouping of ontes see Col 1:21*

dia\ th\n a)/gnoian th\n ou)^san e)n au)toi^s,

dia\ th\n pw/rwsin th^s kardi/as au)tw^ⁿ,

19 oi(/tines a)phlghko/tes e(autou\s pare/dwkan th^| a)selgei/a| ei)s e)rgasi/an

a)kaqarsi/as pa/shs e)n pleoneci/a|.

20-24, You

20 u(me)^s de\ ou)x ou(/tws e)ma/qete to\n Xristo/n,

21 ei/ ge au)to\n h)kou/sate

kai\ e)n au)tw^| e)didaxqhte,

kaqw/s e)stin **a)lh/qeia** e)n tw^|)Ihsou^,

22 a)poqe/sqai u(ma^s kata\ th\n prote/ran a)nastrofh\n to\n palaio\n a)/nqrwpon

to\n fqeiro/menon kata\ ta\s e)piqumi/as th^s a)pa/th,s,

23 a)naneou^sqai de\ tw^| pneu/mati tou^ noo\s u(mw^ⁿ,

24 kai\ e)ndu/sasqai to\n kaino\n a)/nqrwpon

to\n kata\ qeo\n ktisqe/nta

e)n dikaiosunh| kai\ o(sio/thti th^s a)lhqei/as.

4:25-5:6, Moral Injunctions

4:25-27, General Injunction to Sound Teaching

25 Dio\ ... **lalei^te a)lh/qeian** e(/kastos meta\ tou^ plhsi/on au)tou^, <<9>>

a)poqe/menoi to\ yeu^dos

o(/ti e)sme\n a)llh/lwn me/lh. Cf. 5:30

In the light of 4:15,21; 5:6, this is probably not just a general exhortation against lying, but is more specifically focused on the need to speak truth in matters of instruction, exhortation, and correction, where we might be tempted to smooth over things. Then the context of 26-27 in Ps. 4, where they are a tender exhortation by David to his sinful people, would be an example of this. This would then organize the section chiastically.

26 **o)rgi/zesqe** kai\ mh\ a(marta/nete: <<6>>
o(h(/lios mh\ e)pidue/tw e)pi\ [tw^] parorgismw^| u(mw^n,
27 mhde\ di/dote to/pon tw^| diabo/lw|.

4:28-5:5, Specific Injunctions

Note rough chiastic ordering, centered around an exhortation against wrath, thus developing the quotation from Ps. 4.

28 o(**kle/ptwn** mhke/ti klepte/tw, <<8>>
ma^llon de\ kopia/tw
e)rgazo/menos tai^s [i]di/ais] xersi\n to\ a)gaqo/n,
i(/na e)/xh| metadido/nai tw^| xrei/an e)/xonti.

29 pa^s **lo/gos sapro\s** e)k tou^ sto/matos u(mw^n mh\ e)kporeue/sqw, <<7>>
a)lla\ ei)/ tis a)gaqo\s pro\s oi)kodomh\n th^s xrei/as,
i(/na dw^| xa/rin toi^s a)kou/ousin.

30 kai\ mh\ lupei^te to\ **pneu^ma to\ a(/gion tou^ qeou^**,
e)n w(^) e)sfragi/sqhte ei)s h(me/ran a)polutrw/sews.

31 **pa^sa pikri/a kai\ qumo\s kai\ o)rghe** kai\ kraugh\ kai\ blasfhmi/a a)rqh/tw a)f u(mw^n su\n pa/sh| kaki/a|. <<6>>

32 gi/nesqe [de\] ei)s a)llh/lous xrhstoi/, eu)/splagxnoi, xarizo/menoi e(autoi^s
kaqw\s kai\ o(**qeou\s** e)n Xristw^| e)xari/sato u(mi^n.

5:1 gi/nesqe ou^`n mimhtai\ tou^ qeou^, w(s te/kna a)gaphta/,

2 kai\ **peripatei^te e)n a)gaph**,

kaqw\s kai\ o(**Xristo\s** h)ga/phsen h(ma^s

kai\ pare/dwken e(auto\n u(pe\r h(mw^n prosfora\n kai\ qusi/an tw^| qew^| ei)s o)smh\n eu)wdi/as.

3 **pornei/a de\ kai\ a)kaqarsi/a** pa^sa <<7>> h) **pleoneci/a** <<10>> mhde\ o)nomaze/sqw e)n u(mi^n,

kaqw\s pre/pei a(gi/ois,

4 kai\ ai)sxro/ths kai\ mwrologi/a h)\ eu)trapeli/a,

a(\ ou)k a)nh^ken,

a)lla\ ma^llon eu)xaristi/a.

5 tou^to ga\r i)/ste ginw/skontes

o(/ti pa^s **po/mos h) a)ka/qartos h)\ pleone/kths**, o(/ e)stin ei)dwlola/trhs, ou)k e)/xei

klhronomi/an e)n th^| basilei/a| tou^ Xristou^ kai\ qeou^.

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Note in this paragraph how he groups faulty speech with the associated behavior, much as the Savior in Matt 5-7 groups faulty thought with the behavior. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.”

5:6, General Injunction to Sound Teaching

6 Mhdei\s u(ma^s a)pata/tw kenoi^s lo/gois,
dia\ tau^ta ga\r e)/rxetai h(o)rg h\ tou^ qeou^ e)pi\ tou\s ui(ou\s th^s a)pei qei/as.